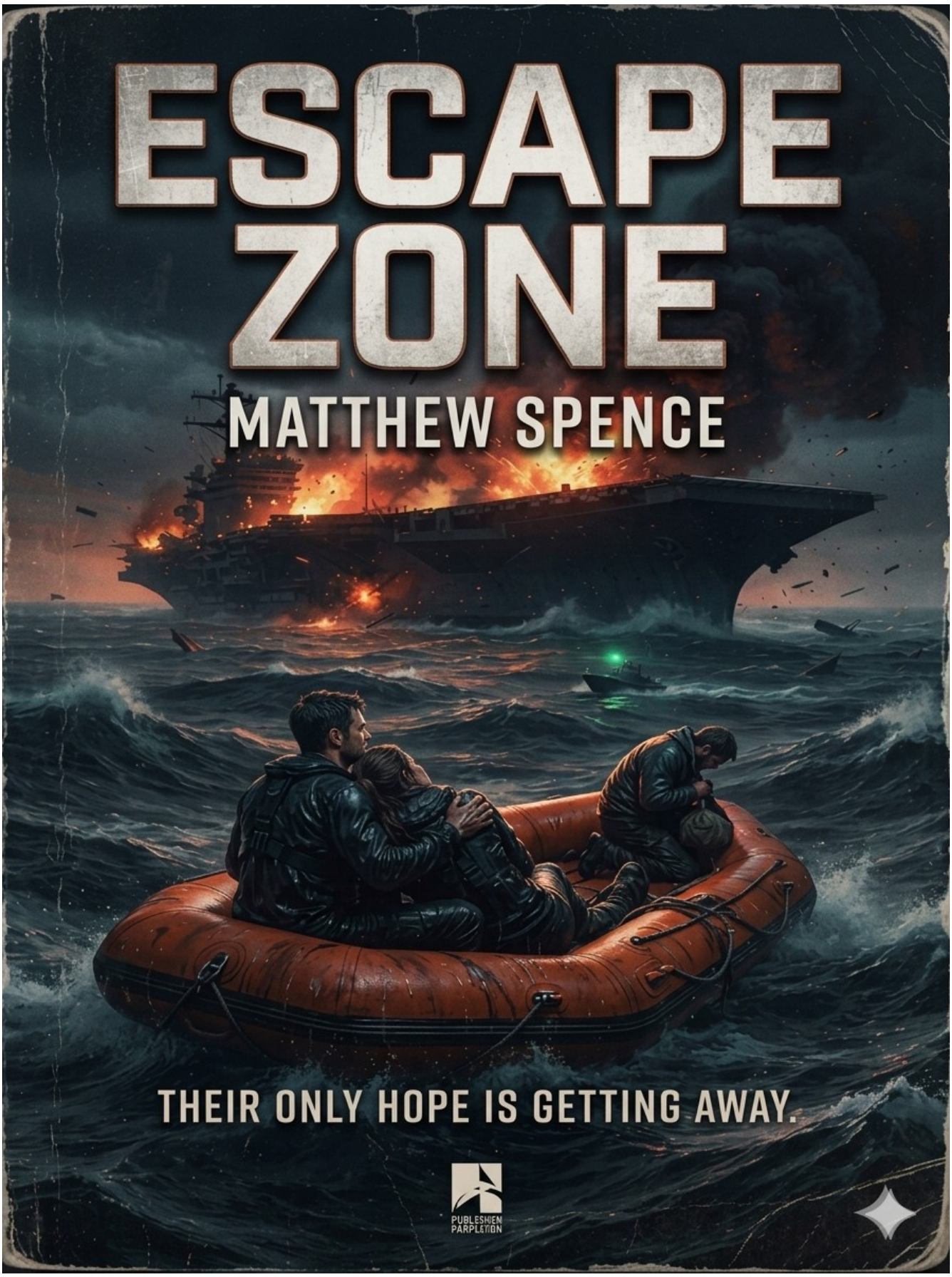
ESCAPE ZONE
MATTHEW SPENCE
THEIR ONLY HOPE IS GETTING AWAY.
PUBLESHIEN PARPLETION

ESCAPE ZONE

By

Matthew Spence

Chapter One: The Rhythm of the Dead

The concrete walls of the bunker hummed with the steady, mechanical vibration of the air filtration unit. It was a sterile, comforting sound, but it couldn't drown out the sharp scratching on the reinforced steel door twenty feet above.

Inside the subterranean tomb, Leo and Maya sat shoulder to shoulder on a stack of plastic ration crates. Their eyes were locked on the bank of grainy, monochrome security monitors that served as their only window to the dead world.

For three weeks, the bunker had kept them breathing while the city above dissolved into blood and ash. In that cramped, fluorescent-lit space, survival had forced two strangers into a brutal, unspoken rhythm. They rationed freeze-dried meals down to the calorie. They checked the battery banks every four hours. They took turns sleeping, one always watching the screens while the other chased nightmares.

Fear had stripped away their social armor. In twenty-one days, Leo had learned that Maya cleared her throat in short, sharp bursts whenever her nerves grew frayed. Maya had learned that Leo silently counted his breaths, four seconds in and four seconds out, to stave off the panic attacks that threatened to choke him. They hadn't chosen each other, but the apocalypse had bypassed the luxury of choice. Strangers had become partners, and partners had become a fierce, quiet dependency.

"Movement on camera three," Maya whispered. Her voice was a dry rasp, barely louder than the hum of the fans.

She pointed a slender, dirt-smudged finger at the monitor on the far left. Leo leaned forward, his muscles tightening.

It wasn’t the staggering, mindless shapes of the infected. These silhouettes moved with a deliberate, lethal purpose. Flashlights cut through the midnight fog of the alleyway, illuminating four men armed with crowbars and rifles.

The Scavengers.

"They're bringing up an oxy-acetylene torch," Leo muttered. His hand instinctively reached out, finding Maya’s. Her palm was cold, but her grip was vice-like, anchoring him to the spot. "They tracked us on our last supply run. They'll be through the outer seal in ten minutes."

As if mocked by timing, a low, rhythmic thumping began to vibrate through the ventilation shafts. It wasn't the raiders, and it wasn't the dead. It was the heavy, thudding chop of military rotors.

The emergency emergency broadcast had promised a final evacuation sweep at midnight. The sound confirmed it. The rescue chopper was hovering over the designated landing zone on the roof of the adjacent parking garage, barely fifty yards from their exit hatch.

"It's now or never," Maya said, turning her head to look directly into Leo's eyes. The flickering light of the monitor danced across her pale face. "If we stay, the gang kills us for the food. If we open the hatch, we face the horde outside."

Leo didn't answer with words. He stood up, grabbed his 12-gauge shotgun from the rack, and racked a shell into the chamber with a loud, metallic *clack*. He reached down and handed Maya the machete she had spent the last month mastering.

"We move fast," Leo said, checking the sidearm at his hip. "Together."

Maya nodded, a fierce determination burning away the exhaustion in her eyes. "Always."

Leo stepped toward the control panel and slammed his palm against the manual override lever. The heavy steel door groaned, its pneumatic seals hissing as they broke. The sudden change in air pressure drew an immediate, guttural chorus of shrieks from the shadows of the stairwell above.

"Run!" Leo yelled.

They burst out of the bunker's safety and straight into a nightmare of crossfire and tearing flesh. The raiders at the top of the stairs had just lit their torch when the hatch flew open, but they never had a chance to aim their rifles. The hiss of the door had attracted a massive wave of sprinting infected from the main street, flooding the upper courtyard like a broken dam.

Leo fired two rapid shells into a decayed woman lunging from a doorway, the blast blowing her backward and clearing a narrow path toward the alley.

Maya moved like a shadow beside him, her blade catching the moonlight. When a rotted hand clamped down on Leo's jacket collar from a blind corner, Maya’s machete swung in a clean, practiced arc. The severed arm fell away, and without missing a beat, she grabbed Leo by his tactical vest and hauled him forward.

They sprinted up the concrete ramp of the parking garage, their lungs burning from the toxic air. Behind them, the sounds of the horde grew deafening—a rising tide of snapping jaws, dragging feet, and screeching corpses ascending the ramp in pursuit.

They burst onto the roof just as the military transport helicopter lowered its rear ramp. A soldier in full tactical gear stood at the precipice, firing a mounted machine gun over their heads, chewing through the infected spilling onto the concrete behind them.

"Come on! Move!" the soldier roared over the deafening scream of the turbine engines.

Leo’s boot caught on an oil slick. He stumbled, slamming hard onto his knees, his shotgun skidding across the pavement. The first of the sprinting dead tore through the rooftop doorway, its jaw unhinged.

Maya didn't look back to see how close the dead were. She simply spun around, grabbed Leo under his arms, and hauled him to his feet with a strength born of pure adrenaline.

"I've got you!" she screamed.

Together, they threw themselves forward in a desperate, blind leap, tumbling over the metal lip of the helicopter ramp just as the heavy machine lifted into the air.

The soldiers slammed the hydraulic ramp shut, sealing out the screams, the gunfire, and the darkness.

Leo lay flat on his back on the corrugated metal floor, gasping for air, the helicopter tilting sharply as it climbed into the night sky. Maya collapsed right next to him, her head resting heavily against his shoulder. As the burning city faded below them into a distant grid of dying fires, Leo reached out and tangled his fingers in hers, squeezing tight.

The bunker was gone, and the world was dead, but looking at her, Leo knew they had carried the only thing that mattered out alive.

Chapter Two: The Ghost Fleet

The interior of the military transport was a cavern of olive-drab steel, smelling of aviation fuel, hot copper, and the sour sweat of terrified soldiers. The vibrations of the rotor blades rattled through Leo’s teeth, but the noise was nothing compared to the silence that had settled between him and Maya.

They sat on a canvas bench, their fingers still tightly locked. Across from them, three soldiers stood at the tiny Plexiglas windows, rifles raised, staring down at the burning carcass of the city below.

"Status report!" a harsh voice barked over the intercom.

The soldier who had pulled them aboard—a sergeant named Vance, his helmet scratched and caked in dried blood—wiped a hand across his grimy face. "We’ve got two survivors from Sector Four, Captain. The bunker is compromised. Scavengers and infected overran the courtyard."

"Are they clean?" the radio crackled back.

Vance turned his hard eyes toward Leo and Maya. He didn't ask nicely. He used the muzzle of his rifle to nudge Leo’s chin up, inspecting his neck, before doing the same to Maya. He was looking for bite marks, fluid stains, or the tells of a fever.

"They're clean," Vance muttered into his comms. He lowered his weapon but didn't soften his posture. He looked at Leo’s shotgun and Maya’s blood-stained machete. "Hand over the weapons. Military protocol inside the bird."

Leo hesitated, his grip tightening on the wooden stock of his 12-gauge. For three weeks, that steel had been his only guarantee of tomorrow.

Maya cleared her throat—that short, sharp burst of nervous energy. Leo looked at her. Her eyes subtly signaled toward the three heavily armed soldiers. Fighting here was death. Slowly, Leo let the shotgun slide from his hands. Maya laid her machete on the floor beside it.

"Smart," Vance said, kicking the weapons into a locker beneath his seat. "Where’d you two learn to move like that? You look like you've been fighting together for years."

"Three weeks," Maya said, her voice small but steady against the engine roar. "In a six-by-nine bunker."

Leo closed his eyes, the sergeant's question pulling him backward in time. The memory of how they had found that concrete tomb rushed in to fill the silence.

It had been twenty-two days ago, during the Great Collapse. The government had ordered a total evacuation, but the highway gridlock had turned into a slaughterhouse. Leo had been running blindly through a maze of corporate alleys, his breath coming in ragged, suffocating gasps as the panic attacks began to paralyze his chest. He had tripped over a pile of debris, expecting to feel teeth in his neck.

Instead, a hand had slammed down on his collar and dragged him through a low, rusted maintenance hatch.

It was Maya. She had been tracking a map her late uncle—a paranoid defense contractor—had left behind. She didn't know Leo, and she didn't have time to ask questions. She had simply jammed her shoulder against the heavy blast door, helping him drop the manual locks just as a dozen infected slammed against the outside steel like a wave of frantic hail.

They had collapsed on the floor of that dark, air-conditioned vault, breathing the sterile air, watching each other with wide, feral eyes. In that first hour, they were terrified of the dead outside, and equally terrified of each other.

"We're entering the safe zone," Vance’s voice shattered the memory, pulling Leo back to the vibrating metal of the helicopter.

Leo blinked, squeezing Maya’s hand to anchor himself. He looked out the small oval window.

They weren't landing at a military base or an airport. Below them, floating in the dark expanse of the Atlantic Ocean miles off the coast, was a massive, illuminated armada. Leo recognized the

silhouettes of aircraft carriers, destroyers, and retrofitted container ships, all linked by floating bridges and surrounded by small patrol boats. The military called it the Atlantic Flotilla—the last bastion of structured civilization.

The helicopter flared, its landing gear striking the flight deck of a massive carrier with a heavy bounce.

The rear ramp lowered, and a blast of salty, cold sea air rushed into the cabin, cutting through the stench of fuel. Vance signaled them forward. "Move out. Welcome to the *USS Vanguard*. Keep your hands where the deck guards can see them."

They stepped onto the windy flight deck. Floods of white spotlights cut through the ocean mist. Hundreds of tents lined the edges of the carrier, packed with pale, hollow-eyed refugees. Soldiers in biohazard gear patrolled the perimeter with live ammunition.

As they were guided toward a processing station, a woman in a crisp, clean naval uniform stepped into their path. Unlike the dirty, exhausted soldiers, her uniform was immaculate, and her eyes were sharp, calculating, and cold.

"Sergeant Vance," the woman said, her voice cutting through the wind. "Are these the two from the Sector Four supply vault?"

"Yes, Dr. Aris," Vance said, offering a quick salute.

Dr. Aris stepped closer to Leo and Maya, ignoring their disheveled clothes and the dirt on their faces. She looked at a digital tablet in her hand, then looked up, a chillingly pleasant smile forming on her lips.

"Excellent," Aris said, her eyes lingering on Maya a second too long. "We've been monitoring the biometric logs of that specific bunker before the external array went dark. Your blood samples are going to be very useful to our research department. Escort them to Sub-Deck Three immediately."

Leo felt a cold jolt of adrenaline spike through his chest. Sub-Deck Three didn't sound like a refugee camp. He looked at Maya, and in the harsh glare of the deck lights, he saw her clear her throat.

The nightmare hadn't ended on the roof of the parking garage. It had just changed shapes.

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Chapter Four: The Depth of the Fleet

The air in Sub-Deck Three did not smell like the sea. It smelled of ozone, bleach, and the heavy, metallic tang of blood. Deep within the bowels of the *USS Vanguard*, beneath the waterline, the ambient temperature plummeted. Condensation dripped from overhead pipes, pattering against the steel floor like steady, rhythmic gunfire.

Two armed guards marched Leo and Maya down a narrow, dimly lit corridor. Dr. Aris walked a few paces ahead, her boots clicking sharply against the deck plates.

"You aren't treating us like refugees," Leo said, his voice echoing off the tight walls. He tried to step closer to Maya, but the guard behind him jammed the barrel of a rifle into his shoulder blade.

"Keep moving, citizen," the guard grunted.

Dr. Aris didn't stop, but she turned her head slightly, her pristine profile cutting through the shadows. "Refugees are a burden on our limited resources, Mr. Vance. You two, however, are an investment. The Sector Four bunker was equipped with an advanced atmospheric and biological monitoring system. For three weeks, you breathed air that we know was laced with a weaponized variant of the pathogen. Yet, you aren't changing."

Maya cleared her throat—two short, terrified bursts. Leo looked at her. Her face was pale under the harsh fluorescent tubes, but her eyes were darting toward the ceiling, tracing the paths of the thick electrical conduits. She was looking for a way out.

"We were sealed in," Maya said, her voice steady despite her racing pulse. "The filters kept it out."

"The filters failed on day ten," Aris replied smoothly, stopping in front of a heavy pneumatic door labeled *Research Laboratory 4-B*. She swiped a keycard, and the door hissed open, revealing a bright, sterile room filled with glass partitions, surgical tables, and monitors displaying DNA sequences. "You survived anyway. Which means your blood holds a rare genetic resistance. And we are going to harvest it."

"Harvest?" Leo growled, his muscles tensing.

Before he could swing around, the guards grabbed his arms, shoving him toward a heavy steel chair equipped with thick leather restraints. Two more guards emerged from the lab, wrapping their hands around Maya.

"Let go of her!" Leo roared, struggling against the grip of three grown men.

"Leo!" Maya screamed as she was pushed toward an adjacent examination table.

Just as a guard forced Leo down into the chair, a massive explosion rocked the ship.

The deck buckled violently. The lights flickered, died, and were instantly replaced by the rotating, crimson glow of emergency sirens. A deafening alarm began to wail through the corridor. The ship listed hard to the port side, throwing Dr. Aris and two of the guards to the floor.

"Report! What was that?" one of the guards shouted into his radio.

Static screamed back, followed by a panicked voice: *"The containment cells on Sub-Deck Four have breached! The test subjects are out! They've cut the power to the lower levels!"*

In the crimson chaos, Leo didn't wait. With the guard beside him off-balance, Leo threw his forehead forward, breaking the man's nose with a sickening crunch. The guard dropped his rifle and clutched his face. Leo lunged across the small space, tackling the second guard before he could raise his weapon, sending both of them crashing into a metal supply cart.

On the other side of the room, Maya didn't need saving. As the ship tilted, she grabbed a heavy steel tray of surgical instruments and slammed it across her captor's temple. He collapsed instantly.

She scrambled across the slick floor, her hands finding a fallen scalpel. She ran to Leo, who was pinned beneath the remaining guard, and jammed the handle of the scalpel hard into the guard's collarbone. The man shrieked, releasing his grip.

Leo scrambled to his feet, gasping for breath. He looked over at Dr. Aris, who was crawling toward the door, her pristine uniform now ruined and stained with grease.

"You won't make it off this deck alive," Aris hissed, her eyes wide with terror as a distant, guttural shriek echoed from the stairwell down the hall. The infected were already coming up from Sub-Deck Four.

Leo reached down, picked up one of the fallen guards' assault rifles, and checked the magazine. He looked at Maya, who had already retrieved a long, heavy iron prybar from an open maintenance locker.

"We don't go back up to the flight deck," Leo said, looking at the structural map of the ship bolted to the wall. "It’ll be a slaughterhouse. We go down to the lower hangar bay. The launch boats."

Maya nodded, her grip on the prybar tightening as she stepped to his side. "Together."

They broke out of the lab into the flashing red shadows of the corridor, turning away from the panicked screams of the upper decks, and diving deeper into the heart of the ghost fleet.

Chapter Five: The Engine of Secrets

The air grew thicker, hotter, and increasingly toxic as Leo and Maya descended into the bowels of Sub-Deck Four. The crimson emergency lights cast long, distorted shadows against the bulkhead walls, pulsing like the heartbeat of a dying beast.

The guttural shrieks from behind them were growing louder, accompanied by the wet, frantic slapping of bare feet on wet steel. The infected soldiers—men who had been transformed by whatever weaponized strain Dr. Aris was cultivating—were hunting them through the maze of the ship.

Leo held the assault rifle tight against his shoulder, his flashlight attachment cutting through the heavy steam pouring from a ruptured pipe ahead. "Hold up," he whispered, gesturing for Maya to stop.

The corridor ahead was choked with bodies, but they weren't just victims of a frantic attack. They were piled high, sealed behind a massive, thick plate of reinforced glass that looked into a central laboratory hub.

Maya stepped up beside him, her iron prybar held ready. She glanced into the glass chamber, and her breath hitched.

Inside the illuminated, ruined lab were rows of glass cylinders. Most were shattered, but a few remained intact, holding grotesque, mutated figures suspended in a thick, amber fluid. The

monitors surrounding the tanks were still flickering, displaying data streams titled *Project Rebirth: Apex Strain*.

"They weren't trying to cure the outbreak," Maya said, her voice trembling as she read the glowing text. "Leo... they manufactured it. They used the civilian population to test the infection rates, and they were using the flotilla to perfect a weaponized army."

Before Leo could absorb the horror of what she was saying, a heavy metallic *clank* echoed from a maintenance hatch just a few yards ahead. Leo spun, raising his rifle, his finger tightening on the trigger.

"Don't shoot! Please, don't shoot!" a voice desperately cried out.

The hatch swung open completely, and a man slid out onto the deck plates, hands raised in surrender. He wore a grease-stained orange jumpsuit, a heavy tool belt jangling at his waist. He was an engineer, his face pale and slick with sweat.

"I'm clean, I swear to God I'm clean," the engineer gasped, looking from the barrel of Leo's gun to the crimson shadows behind them. "I'm Jackson. Chief Power Systems Engineer. The things... they broke out of the medical hold. They're tearing through the security details."

"We're trying to get to the lower hangar bay," Leo said, lowering the rifle slightly but keeping his stance rigid. "The launch boats. Can you get us through?"

Jackson let out a bitter, breathless laugh. "The hangar bay is on complete electronic lockdown. Aris and the high command initiated a failsafe. If you don't have a high-level security clearance override, those blast doors are nothing but five hundred tons of immovable titanium."

Maya stepped forward, her eyes narrowing as she looked at Jackson's tool belt. "But you're the chief engineer. You know the manual overrides."

"The manual bypass is in the main environmental control room," Jackson said, pointing down a dark, secondary maintenance shaft. "But it's flooded with steam, and the backup generator down there is failing. I was running away from it when I heard you."

A terrifying shriek echoed from the stairwell they had just abandoned. The first of the infected burst into the corridor—a creature wearing a shredded naval uniform, its jaw dislocated and dripping with black bile.

Leo fired three controlled bursts, the heavy rounds tearing through the creature’s chest and dropping it instantly. But behind it, a dozen more shadows emerged from the red glare.

"We don't have a choice," Leo shouted over the gunfire. "Jackson, lead the way to the control room. We protect you, you open those doors."

"Alright! Follow me!" Jackson yelled, scrambling back toward the narrow maintenance shaft.

Maya grabbed Leo’s arm, her grip fierce and solid. "We open the doors, we grab a boat, and we leave this entire fleet to burn."

"Together," Leo said, slamming a fresh magazine into his rifle as they dove into the dark, steaming pipeline shaft, the screams of the dead hot on their heels.

Chapter Six: The Pressure Valve

The maintenance shaft felt less like a corridor and more like the throat of a volcano. Scalding white steam hissed violently from cracked joints in the overhead pipes, blinding Leo’s tactical flashlight and coating his skin in slick, hot moisture. The air was thin, smelling of scorched rubber and boiling oil.

"Watch your step!" Jackson yelled over the deafening roar of escaping pressure. He scrambled down a vertical ladder, his heavy boots clanging against the rungs. "The main floor of the environmental room is flooded with high-temperature drainage. Step in that, and you’ll boil your boots right to your feet!"

Leo went down next, his assault rifle slung tightly across his back. He reached up, his hands catching Maya’s waist as she descended, helping her drop onto the narrow, elevated metal catwalk. Below them, a foot of murky, bubbling grey water covered the deck plates, sending up thick plumes of suffocating heat.

The control room was a cavern of rusted machinery and ancient digital dials. In the center sat the main environmental console, its status lights flashing a frantic, warning amber.

"The manual override lever for the hangar blast doors is on the far side of that secondary turbine," Jackson said, pointing a trembling hand across a gap in the catwalk.

The gap was barely four feet wide, but the problem wasn't the distance. Directly above the gap, a massive main steam line had ruptured. A high-velocity, invisible stream of superheated steam was roaring across the open space. The sheer kinetic force of it rattled the steel beams. To cross meant being sliced in half by thermal energy.

"It's a dead end," Leo muttered, wiping sweat from his eyes.

"No, it's a pressure trap," Jackson gasped, running to a secondary panel on their side of the catwalk. "The system is automated. I can reroute the pressure to the auxiliary bypass, but it takes two people to turn the manual release valves simultaneously. One is right here. The other is up on that high platform."

Jackson pointed toward a rusted iron ladder leading to a catwalk directly beneath the ceiling, where a massive red wheel valve sat shrouded in hissing vapor.

"I'll go," Maya said instantly.

"It’s too hot up there, Maya," Leo argued, grabbing her arm. "The steam rises."

"You have the rifle, Leo. If those things find the shaft, you're the only one who can hold the line," she replied, her voice cutting through the mechanical roar. She squeezed his hand. "Trust me."

Before he could argue, a violent crash echoed from the maintenance shaft above. The steel hatch they had closed behind them groaned under a massive weight. A second later, the metal warped inward. The infected had followed the heat and the noise.

"Go!" Leo yelled.

Maya sprinted up the vertical ladder, her iron prybar swinging from her belt.

Leo spun toward the entrance of the control room, raising his rifle. The hatch tore free from its hinges. The first creature to tumble through was a massive, bloated specimen wearing the remnants of a security guard's tactical vest. It didn't feel the heat; its eyes were milky, dead, and locked on Leo.

Leo opened fire. Three rounds caught the creature in the chest, but the thick vest absorbed the impact. It kept coming, its jaw snapping wildly. Leo aimed higher, a single round shattering its skull. It collapsed over the railing, splashing heavily into the boiling water below, its flesh instantly blistering.

More shrieks echoed from the shaft. A torrent of bodies began pouring down the ladder.

"Maya! Now!" Leo shouted, dumping half a magazine into the crowding stairwell to keep them pinned.

Up on the high platform, the air was a suffocating fog. Maya wrapped her hands around the massive iron wheel. It was scorching hot, burning right through the thick canvas gloves she had stolen from the bunker. She gritted her teeth, a scream catching in her throat, and threw her weight against the wheel.

"It's stuck!" she yelled down.

"Use the bar!" Jackson screamed from below, his hands already straining against the primary valve on the lower deck. "Pop the rusted seal!"

Maya unhooked the iron prybar from her belt and jammed it between the spokes of the wheel, using it as a lever. She leaned her entire body into it, her muscles tearing, her vision blurring from the heat.

Snap.

The rust gave way. Maya spun the wheel violently to the left. At the exact same moment, Jackson threw his weight into the lower valve.

With a deafening mechanical shriek, a massive bypass vent on the far wall slammed open. The invisible wall of superheated steam crossing the catwalk vanished, redirected out into the ocean through the ship's hull.

"The path is open!" Jackson yelled. "Go!"

Leo didn't hesitate. He fired one last burst into the advancing horde, turned, and leaped across the open gap in the catwalk, landing hard on the steel grating near the hangar control lever.

But as his boots hit the deck, a hand clamped down on his ankle from below.

One of the infected, its skin half-boiled from the flooded floor, had crawled up the structural support beams. It yanked hard, pulling Leo's legs out from under him. The assault rifle clattered out of his hands, sliding across the wet grating and falling directly into the bubbling water below.

The creature scrambled onto the catwalk, pinning Leo's chest, its black bile dripping inches from his face. Leo jammed his forearm against its throat, his bones creaking under the creature's unnatural, rabid strength. His grip was slipping.

A shadow fell over them.

Maya dropped from the high ladder, her iron prybar coming down in a brutal, two-handed overhead swing. The heavy iron struck the creature's temple with a sickening crunch. The infected body went limp, rolling off Leo and tumbling over the edge into the steam.

Maya grabbed Leo’s hand, pulling him to his feet. Her palms were blistered red from the hot valve, but her grip didn't waver.

"Thanks," Leo gasped, his heart hammering against his ribs.

"Don't celebrate yet," Maya said, pointing to the console.

Leo grabbed the massive, yellow-handled emergency override lever. He looked at Maya, took a breath, and slammed it downward.

Deep within the bulkhead walls, massive hydraulic gears began to turn. A low, bass-heavy groan vibrated through the ship as the five-hundred-ton titanium blast doors leading to the lower hangar bay slowly began to split open.

"We're in," Jackson whispered, staring at the widening gap of darkness ahead.

But from the flooded floor below, the water began to churn violently as dozens more shadows crawled out of the steam, their dead eyes fixed on the open doorway.

Chapter Seven: The Launch Deck

The titanium blast doors tore apart with an agonizing screech, revealing the cavernous expanse of the lower hangar bay. Outside, the pitch-black Atlantic Ocean churned violently against the ship’s submerged hull, visible through a row of open launch apertures. Cold, salty spray drifted into the hangar, cutting through the suffocating heat of the environmental room.

But the path wasn't clear. Stripped of its automated power, the hangar bay was lit only by the sweeping crimson beams of the emergency beacons.

"There!" Jackson shouted, pointing through the red gloom toward a raised metal gantry. "The long-range reconnaissance launches! They have independent fuel cells. They don't need the ship's main grid!"

Two sleek, armor-plated watercraft hung from heavy mechanical davits over the open ocean. But between the escapees and the boats stood a barricade of overturned supply crates and sandbags.

And behind that barricade were rifles.

"Hold your fire!" a voice boomed across the hangar deck, amplified by a megaphone. "Identify yourselves, or you will be neutralized!"

Leo pulled Maya behind a thick steel pillar just as a spotlight cut through the darkness, pinning them in its harsh white glare. Through the shadows, Leo could see a dozen soldiers. They weren't wearing the pristine uniforms of Dr. Aris’s research staff, nor were they wearing biohazard gear. Their tactical vests were torn, their faces smudged with soot and grease.

"We’re survivors from the upper decks!" Leo shouted back, his voice hoarse. "The medical ward is breached! The infected are right behind us!"

A tall, broad-shouldered soldier with a scarred jaw stepped over the sandbags, a heavy combat rifle resting against his shoulder. He looked at Leo, then at Maya, and finally at Jackson’s orange jumpsuit.

"Chief Jackson?" the soldier called out, his tone shifting. "It’s Lieutenant Torres, Third Security Detachment. Is that really you?"

"Torres!" Jackson cried, stepping out from behind a crate with his hands raised. "The lower decks are gone, Torres! Aris lost control of the test subjects. They’re flooding the maintenance shafts!"

Torres didn't hesitate. "Open the perimeter! Get them inside!"

Leo and Maya sprinted across the slick hangar floor, Jackson trailing frantically behind. The moment they crossed the threshold of the sandbags, two soldiers slammed a set of manual security gates shut, locking them into the launch perimeter.

"We’ve been holding this deck for six hours," Torres said, his eyes scanning the dark corridor they had just fled. "Command abandoned us when the labs went dark. They sealed the upper elevators and left my men down here to drown or turn. We were prepping the last launch boat when the main doors started moving."

"You only have one boat?" Maya asked, her eyes darting to the gantry.

One of the two reconnaissance launches was completely dark, its hull torn open by a loose crane during the initial explosions. The second boat, however, was humming with life, its navigation lights blinking green against the dark water below.

"We have one working craft," Torres confirmed, his jaw tightening. "And we have twelve men left in my squad. With you three, that makes fifteen. The launch only seats ten safely. Twelve if we dump the gear."

The math was brutal. A heavy, suffocating silence fell over the barricade, broken only by the distant, rhythmic clicking of the cooling turbine engines. Soldiers looked at each other, hands shifting nervously on their rifle grips. The bond of military brotherhood was fraying under the weight of survival.

Before anyone could speak, a massive thud shook the security gates.

The metal groaned. Through the bars, a sea of pale, melted flesh and snapping jaws slammed against the barrier. The infected from the environmental room had arrived, squeezed into the narrow corridor like blood through a clogged artery.

"They're through the secondary seals!" a sentry yelled. "Sir, the gate hinges are giving way!"

"Get the boat ready for immediate drop!" Torres roared, turning toward his squad. "Load the civilians first! Jackson, get to the console and prime the manual release winch!"

Jackson nodded frantically and sprinted up the stairs toward the gantry control booth.

But as Leo and Maya moved toward the boarding ramp of the launch, Leo noticed Jackson’s eyes. The engineer wasn't looking at the winch controls. He was looking at a secondary auxiliary override switch labeled *Emergency Single-Occupant Eject*.

Maya saw it too. She caught Leo’s arm, her blistered fingers digging into his jacket. "Leo... he’s going to drop the boat without us."

Jackson reached the booth and slammed the heavy glass door shut, locking it from the inside. Through the window, his face was twisted in a mask of pure, feral panic. He didn't look at Torres. He didn't look at the soldiers firing into the roaring horde at the gates.

He threw a single, heavy toggle switch.

The mechanical davits holding the launch boat groaned. The steel cables began to unravel at high speed, dropping the boat toward the churning ocean below before anyone had even stepped onto the ramp.

"Jackson! What the hell are you doing?!" Torres screamed, spinning around and raising his rifle toward the glass booth.

But Jackson didn't look back. He grabbed a duffel bag of stolen rations from the floor of the booth and bolted toward a tiny, secondary captain's gig hanging from the far side of the gantry—a small, two-person life raft meant for a quick escape.

The gates blew entirely off their hinges. A wave of boiled, screeching infected poured over the sandbags, swarming the first line of soldiers. The hangar dissolved into a nightmare of muzzle flashes, screaming men, and tearing flesh.

Leo looked at the main launch boat, which was now hanging twenty feet below the gantry, dangling dangerously close to the dark water. Then he looked at Maya.

"The captain's gig," Leo said, his voice dropping all fear, leaving only a cold, hard focus. "Jackson left the platform open."

Maya tightened her grip on her iron prybar, her eyes locking onto his. "He's not leaving us behind."

Chapter Eight: The Open Sea

The air in the hangar bay split with the roar of submachine guns and the wet, tearing sounds of flesh. Lieutenant Torres was a mountain of defiance, his rifle spitting fire into the wall of infected that had finally breached the sandbags.

"Jump!" Torres roared over his shoulder to his remaining men, pointing down at the main launch boat dangling twenty feet below the gantry. "Get to the deck! Jump!"

One by one, the surviving soldiers threw themselves over the railing, tumbling through the red-lit void to crash hard onto the armor-plated roof of the descending craft. Torres fired his last magazine, dropped the empty weapon, and leaped after them just as a dozen decaying hands clawed at his tactical vest.

But Leo and Maya were already sprinting in the opposite direction.

They raced across the vibrating metal walkways of the gantry toward the isolated platform where Jackson had fled. The chief engineer was frantic, his hands trembling as he violently hammered a manual release lever on the secondary captain’s gig. The small, two-person life raft was already unhooking from its safety clamps.

"Jackson!" Leo yelled.

The engineer spun around, his face pale and slick with sweat under the sweeping crimson emergency lights. Seeing Leo’s cold stare and the blood-stained iron prybar in Maya’s hand, Jackson pulled a heavy brass flare gun from his tool belt and pointed it directly at Leo’s chest.

"Stay back!" Jackson screamed, his voice cracking with the pure, feral panic of a cornered animal. "There isn't enough fuel for all of us! This raft is mine! I built the systems on this ship, I earned my way off it!"

"You left those men to die," Maya said, her voice dropping all warmth. She stepped forward, her boots clicking softly against the grating. "You locked them out."

"They were already dead!" Jackson shrieked, his eyes darting toward the main hangar floor where the screams were finally beginning to fade into a chorus of guttural feasts. "We all are!"

His finger tightened on the heavy trigger of the flare gun.

Leo didn't wait for the flash. He lunged forward, throwing his weight low. The flare gun went off with a deafening *bang*, blinding the dark platform with a brilliant, scorching white light, but the magnesium projectile zipped harmlessly over Leo's shoulder, striking a fuel drum in the distance and erupting into a violent shower of sparks.

Leo tackled Jackson against the low guardrail of the raft. The engineer fought with the desperate strength of a coward, scratching at Leo's face and trying to gouge his eyes. They tumbled together over the low lip of the captain's gig just as the final hydraulic clamp snapped.

The small raft dropped like a stone into the darkness.

"Leo!" Maya cried.

She didn't hesitate. She threw her iron prybar onto the deck of the raft and leaped over the gantry railing just as the platform cleared the ship's hull. She hit the rubberized floor of the falling raft hard, the breath knocking completely from her lungs, her fingers scrambling for a handhold as gravity took them.

The raft struck the black, churning surface of the Atlantic Ocean with a bone-jarring impact. A massive wall of icy, salty water crashed over the sides, blinding them all and instantly soaking them to the skin.

The raft bobbed violently in the wake of the massive aircraft carrier. Above them, the *USS Vanguard* loomed like a dying metal monster, smoke and fire pouring from its lower sub-decks, its hull groaning as internal explosions ripped through its spine.

In the center of the flooded raft, Jackson was scrambling on his hands and knees, reaching desperately for the starter cord of the small outboard motor. "Get away from me!" he screamed at Leo, his bare hands slapping against the wet fiberglass. "Get away!"

Leo stood up, his boots slipping on the wet floor. He didn't strike the man. He simply grabbed Jackson by the collar of his orange jumpsuit, hauled him up, and threw him hard against the stern of the boat.

"Touch that engine again, and I throw you into the water," Leo said, his voice a low, shivering growl.

Maya crawled to the control console, her hands finding the small throttle lever. She looked out across the pitch-black waves. A few hundred yards away, the green navigation lights of the primary launch boat cut through the mist. Lieutenant Torres had made it. His boat was moving, heading away from the burning ghost fleet and out toward the empty horizon.

Maya looked back at Leo. Her short, sharp cough of nervous energy was gone, replaced by a quiet, exhausted calm. Her face was smudged with soot and grease, her hands raw and blistered, but her eyes were entirely steady.

Leo walked over and knelt beside her, his body shivering from the freezing spray. He didn't look at Jackson, who was now weeping silently in the back of the raft, clutching his stolen duffel bag of rations. Leo reached out, his fingers freezing but strong, and tangled them deeply in Maya’s.

Behind them, a massive secondary explosion ripped through the flight deck of the *USS Vanguard*, sending a brilliant pillar of fire into the clouds, briefly illuminating the endless, empty expanse of the sea ahead.

The bunker was a memory. The military rescue was a lie. The world was still dead. But as Maya turned her head and rested it firmly against Leo's wet shoulder, the steady throttle of the small engine humming beneath their feet, they knew they had carried the only truth left alive into the dark.